1. Greek ἁμαυρός is a typical instance of an archaic poetic epithet, misinterpreted in later literature and consequently lending itself to misinterpretation in the standard works of reference as well. According to the *LSJ*, the meaning of ἁμαυρός is ‘hardly seen, dim, faint, obscure’; this lemma has not been substantially revised in the 1996 Supplement, and the same meaning appears in a number of other dictionaries.¹ There is little doubt that the word came to mean something like ‘dark’ in the Byzantine period (ἁμαυρός· μέλας, ἁμαυρόν· σκοτεινόν); the question is what it meant in antiquity.

One major work of reference where a different opinion is stated is W. Crönert’s ambitious but unfinished revision of F. Passow’s *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache* (itself the basis for the original *LSJ*): there in the entry penned by P. Maas ἁμαυρός is glossed as ‘schwach, matt, trübe’.² In what follows I will attempt to demonstrate that Maas was right, and that the sense ‘dark, dim’ is a secondary development from an original meaning ‘weak, feeble’ (section 2); once the correct meaning is established, a novel etymology for the word can be proposed (section 3).³

2. The earliest two attestations of this epithet are in the Odyssey and in Sappho, in contexts that are sufficiently similar to each other to be examined jointly. In both passages ἁμαυρός refers to phantoms: in the Odyssey it is the εἰδωλον, a vision of Penelope’s sister Iphthime, while in Sappho the epithet is applied to νέκυες, ghosts in Hades:

*Od*. 4.824 = 835

τὴν δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενον προσέφη εἰδωλον ἁμαυρόν

The ἁμαυρός phantom said to her in reply

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¹ *LfgrE*: “nebelhaft, dunkel”; *DGE* gives ‘dim’ as the basic meaning (“tenue, borroso”), while offering ‘weak’ (“flojo, debil”) as secondary.

² See W. Crönert, *Passow’s Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache, völlig neu bearbeitet* (Göttingen 1912) 342. Maas probably got this idea from his teacher Wilamowitz, according to whom ‘schwach’ was the “right” meaning of the word (*Euripides. Herakles*, vol. 2 (Berlin 1895) 35).

³ I am not aware of any lexicographic studies of ἁμαυρός besides A. P. McKinlay, ‘On the way scholars interpret ἁμαυρός’, *AC* 26 (1957) 12-39, which merely lists all passages where ἁμαυρός occurs, together with translations proposed for these to date.
Sappho 55 Voigt

catθάνοισα δὲ κείσθι οὐδὲ ποτα μναμοσύνα σέθεν
έσσετ᾿ οὐδὲ ᾗ ποκ᾿ ᾗ ύστερον· οὐ γὰρ πεδέχης βρόδων
τὸν ἐκ Πιερίας· ἀλλ᾿ ἀφάνης κἂν Αἴδα δόμωι
φοιτάσθης πεδ᾿ ἀμάυρον νεκών ἐκπεποταμένα.

But when you die you will lie there, and afterwards
there will never be any recollection of you
since you have no share in the roses of Pieria;
unseen in the house of Hades, flown from our midst,
you will go to and fro among the ἀμαυρό- dead.

Despite the difference between the two passages — a description of a dream in Homer vs. a threat of withholding immortality granted through poetry in Sappho — it comes as no surprise that the same epithet is used to characterize the apparition of a living person (Iphthime) and the ghosts of the dead: the Greeks called both εἴδωλα. We need only compare Sappho’s image of the aimlessly wandering dead with the words of Patroclus’ spirit visiting Achilles:

_II. 23.72–74_

τῇλε μὲ εἵργουσι ψυχαί εἴδωλα καμόντων,
οὐδὲ μὲ πιω μίσγεσθαι ύπερ ποταμοίο ἐδοιν,
ἀλλ᾿ αὕτως ἀλάληµαι ἀν᾿ εὐρυπυλὲς Ἀἴδος δῶ.

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5 The interpretation of the poem, especially the last two and a half lines, is not universally agreed upon: see Page, _Sappho and Alcaeus_ (n. 4, above) 137 and recently W. Tortorelli, ‘Sappho’s Roses: Audience and Memory’ (paper read at the 103rd _Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South_, 2007). The problem is caused not so much by the text itself, as by Plutarch’s testimony: he cites the first two lines twice, saying in one place that the poem was addressed to an uneducated woman and in another place that it was addressed to a rich woman. It is therefore uncertain whether the poem is personal at all.
The souls, the images of dead men, hold me at a distance, and will not let me cross the river and mingle among them, but I wander as I am by Hades’ house of the wide gates.6

How were these εἰδώλα imagined? Shadow, of course, is one major recurrent motif, found, for instance, in the scene from the Nekuia where Odysseus tries in vain to embrace the dead ghost of his mother which flows from his hands like a shadow, σκέτη εἰκέλον (Od. 11.207), or Pindar’s famous σκιά ὀναρ ‘dream of shade’ (P. 8.95) referring to the hero Amphiaraus visualizing his son Alcmaeon.7 Based on the idea of the shade, ἀμαυρόν εἰδώλον in the Odyssey has been taken to mean a ‘dark, shadowy spectre’ and ἀμαυρῶν νεκών in Sappho has been understood as ‘shadowy dead’. Further variations on the same notion have included ‘dim’, ‘dark’, ‘faint’ and ‘obscure’.8

However, the connotations of shadow include not only visual effects, but also weakness and insignificance. For instance, the εἰδώλον of Patroclus escapes from Achilles like vapor, ἡ ἄρτε καπνός (Il. 23.100): this comparison emphasizes lack of physical substance more than anything else. It behoves us therefore to consider an alternative interpretation of ἀμαυρὸν εἰδώλον as ‘frail phantom’.

Among the epithets of phantoms and ghosts in early Greek poetry a particularly frequent one is ἀμενηνός, usually translated as ‘helpless’, e.g. πόλαι ἀμενηνόν ὀνείρων ‘gates of helpless dreams’ (Od. 19.562) or νεκών ἀμενηνά κάρηνα ‘helpless heads of the dead’ (4x Od.).9 That the word indeed means ‘without power’ is clear from its other uses: in the Iliad it refers to the hypothetical consequences of a wound received by Ares, and in Sophocles’ Ajax it refers to the mental impairment of the hero:

6 The expression εἰδώλα καμόντων is also used at Od. 11.476; 24.14.

7 See G. Nagy, ‘“Dream of a shade”: refractions of epic vision in Pindar’s “Pythian 8” and Aeschylus’ “Seven against Thebes” ’, HSCP 100 (2000) 97-118 (110–13).

8 For instance, A. Luppino, ‘Una formula omerica in Saffo’, PP 22 (1967) 286-291 (290) has suggested ‘oscuri morti’, emphasizing the idea of “non-visibility” expressed earlier in the same sentence by ὀφάνης as well as by Αἰοίς (*η-μίδ-), but see the cogent objections by E. Tzamali, Syntax und Stil bei Sappho. (Dettelbach 1996) 284–85; in particular, Tzamali has presented an interesting argument in favor of understanding ὀφάνης here as ‘fame-less’ (cf. οὐδὲ μνημοσύνα). However, Tzamali’s own interpretation of ἀμαυρῶν νεκών as ‘unbedeutenden Toten’, inspired by Hesiod’s use of the word in the sense ‘demoted’, in my opinion lacks conviction.

9 According to R. C. Jebb, Sophocles. Plays and Fragments, 7 vols (Cambridge 1889-96) VII (The Ajax) 138, the notion here is ‘unsubstantial’.
II. 5.885–87

Otherwise I should long be lying there in pain among the stark dead men, or go living without strength because of the strokes of the bronze spear.

Soph. Aj. 887–90

It is cruel that I, who have roamed with such great toil, cannot come near him with a fair course, but fail to see where the enfeebled man is.

To sum up the argument thus far, the adjective ἁμαρτός in its two earliest attestations is not any likelier to mean ‘dark’ than ‘weak, feeble’. The similarity in use between ἁμαρτός and ἁμενηνός is potentially instructive, since the latter is universally agreed to have had the original meaning ‘weak’.10

Incidentally, in Aristophanes ἁμενηνός stands back to back with the compound ἁμαρθόβος ‘having ἁμαρθό- life’ in the introduction to the bird cosmogony. This rich passage turns out to be quite informative for our purposes:

10 ἁμενηνός is a privative compound with μένος in its archaic meaning ‘strength’ used as the second member; the word is either extended with a further suffix */-ἀνο/ (see E. Schwyzer, Griechische Grammatik (München 1939) 490) or, more likely, modeled after ἁμηνός (H. Frisk, Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Heidelberg 1960–72) 91; R. S. P. Beekes, Etymological Dictionary of Greek (Leiden 2010) 86.
Come now, you men out there, who live such μαυρό- lives—
you’re frail, just like a race of leaves—you’re shaped from clay,
your tribes of insubstantial shadows without wings,
your creatures of a day, unhappy mortal men,
your figures from a dream, now turn your minds to us

The chorus of birds clearly emphasizes the fragile, transcendent nature of the human race; the same idea of temporality is evoked by the comparison of men to leaves, echoing Homer and Mimnermus.\(^\text{11}\) The adjective σκιοειδέα may have prompted the translation ‘living in darkness’ adopted by the \textit{LSJ}, but the general idea of frailty which this passage focalizes is much better captured by N. Dunbar’s ‘living feeble lives’.\(^\text{12}\)

Let us now briefly comment on the use of μαυρός in tragedy and propose a scenario for the subsequent development of the semantics of the word. Thanks to its associations with the spirits of the dead, the word has evolved into a generalized sinister epithet:

\begin{quote}
Aesch. \textit{Choe.} 157

κλύε δέ μοι σέβας, κλύ’, ὃ δέσποτ’, ἐξ / ἀμαυράς φρενός

hear me, oh hear me, my honored lord, out of your ἀμαυρό- mind
\end{quote}

A. Garvie has correctly observed that the φρήν is that of deceased Agamemnon.\(^\text{13}\) Garvie’s comparison with χθονία φρενί (Pi. \textit{P}. 5.101) is likewise very compelling: just as in Pindar the sacred kings of older times hear with their minds beneath the earth of the great achievements, in Aeschylus ἀμαυρός simply signifies the fact that Agamemnon is now a ghost in Hades (ἀμαυρή

\(^{11}\) \textit{Il.} 6.146; Mimn. fr. 2.1–8 W.\(^\text{2}\)


\(^{13}\) A. F. Garvie, \textit{Aeschylus. Choefori} (Oxford 1986) 84.
meaning ‘of ᾑμαύρων νεκών’). Such bold usages of ᾑμαύρός must have given rise to reinterpretations of the obscure word: apparently it is in fifth century tragic poetry that the meaning ‘dim’, ‘shadowy’, ‘dark’ begins to emerge; in certain passages it has to be recognized as predomina nt.

The use of ᾑμαύρός by Sophocles, especially in Oedipus at Colonus must have engendered particular confusion: many commentators have attempted to render ᾑμαύρω κόλω (OC 182) or ᾑμαυραῖς χερσίν (OC 1639) as ‘blind steps’ or ‘blind hands’, assuming a metonymical transfer of Oedipus’ blindness to his limbs. But this does not seem necessary, and the meaning ‘weak, feeble’ would suit all passages just as well.

The adjective ᾑμαύρός is thus closely associated with the dead, the otherworldly and the impaired.

2.2 Next we should turn to the factitive verb ᾑμαύρω: does it mean ‘make dim’ or ‘make feeble’? The immediate answer is neither: the actual meaning of ᾑμαύρω in early Greek poetry is ‘to destroy’, ‘to make naught’. For instance, Pindar describes Perseus’ killing Medousa and Graiai in the following way:

Pi. P. 12.13

\[\text{ητοί τὸ τε \thetaεσπέσιον \Φόρκοι} \, \text{ἀμαύρωσεν γένος}\]

he destroyed the awesome race of Phorkos

The tragedians are fond of this verb, which they likewise use in the meaning ‘to destroy’, although not quite so literally as Pindar:

Aesch. Ag. 464–66

\[\text{τυχηρὸν ὧντ' ἄνευ δίκας}\]

\[\text{παλιντυχεῖ τριβαί βίου}\]

\[\text{πίθεῖον ἁμαυρόν}\]

14 H. Friis Johansen and E. Whittle have included this passage among the evidence amassed by them for the heart or φρένος or σπλάγχνα to turn black from grief, fear or anger (Aeschylus: The Suppliants, 3 vols (Copenhagen 1980) 3 134–35); this interpretation, however, is unwarranted, in my opinion.

15 See e.g. Jebb, The Ajax (above, n. 9) 40 (ad Aj. 182) or E. Fraenkel, Aeschylus. Agamemnon (Oxford 1950) 236 (ad Ag. 466).

16 With ᾑμαύρῳ κόλῳ Wilamowitz compared ποδὸς ᾑμαύρον ᾦγος “feeble steps” (Eur. HF 123), Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Herakles (above, n. 2) 35.
when a man is prosperous without justice,
by wearing away his life in a reverse of fortune,
(the Erinyes) bring him to ruin

Eur. Hipp. 816

τίς ἄρα σάν, τάλαν', ἁμαρτόι ζῶαν;
Who brings your life to ruin, poor woman?

While the verb ἁμαρτάω applied to persons may be interpreted as ‘to make into a faint shade’ (viz. a ghost, a shadow roaming in Hades), this interpretation is quite unlikely in the passage from Euripides above where the verb is construed with ζῶαν (translated by W. S. Barrett as ‘brings to naught’). 

The causal relationship between ἁμαρτάω and δίκη (or, rather, the lack thereof) found in the passage from Aeschylus above may hark back to Hesiod, where the verb is applied to the consequences of unjust behavior:


εὖτ’ ἄν δὴ κέρδος νόον ἐξαπατήσῃ
ἀνθρώπων, αἰδώ δὲ τ’ ἀναιδεία κατοπάζῃ,
ῥεῖτα δὲ μιν μαυρόσι θεοί, μινύθουσι δὲ οἶκον

When lust for profit deceives the intelligence given to mankind and when immodesty shamelessly casts out modesty wholly, readily heaven μαυρό-es that man and diminishes his house

In this passage μαυρῶ is paired with μινύθῳ, which may suggest that the former verb here has a meaning like “belittle”. Such an assumption can be countered by a comparison to Solon’s elegy:

Solon 4.34–37 W.:

τραχέα λειαίνει, παύει κόρον, ὃβριν ἁμαρτοῖ,
αἰδαίνει δ’ ἀτης ἄνθεα φυόμενα

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18 The unusual form of the root will be discussed presently.
εὐθύνει δὲ δίκας σκολιάς, ὑπερήψανᾷ τ’ ἔργα
πραύνει· παῦει δ’ ἔργα διχοστασίης
she ( = Ἑυνομίη) smooths the rough, stops insolence, **imparts violence**, she withers the budding flowers of ruin,
she straightens crooked judgments, haughty deeds
she assuages, and she stops the deeds of sedition.

V. 36 εὐθύνει δὲ δίκας σκολιάς with its distinctive Hesiodic feel makes it particularly plausible that Solon was relying on a Hesiodic didactic tradition here. But it is also clear that ὃβρις in v. 34 is not “diminished”: a stronger verbal action is called for. If — but it is only if — Solon was composing his elegy with Hesiod’s verses about divine justice in mind, it may be possible to link his use of ἀμανρόω with the Hesiodic and to translate the verb in both poems as ‘destroy, bring to naught’.

2.3 To sum up the results of our inquiry into the semantics of ἀμανρός: it appears quite likely that the adjective originally referred to physical weakness, death and lack of substance, and that the factitive verb ἀμανρόω meant ‘bring to naught, destroy’.

3. Having established the likely original meaning of ἀμανρός, we can now revisit the etymology of the word.

The handbooks offer virtually nothing beyond the customary “unsicher” and “inconnue”.19 Few previous attempts to solve the mystery of ἀμανρό- have been unsuccessful, partly because they have started from a wrong meaning of the word.20 R. S. P. Beekes, well

19 “Il n’est pas surprenant qu’un terme de ce genre, pris en mauvaise part et de sens assez mal défini, ne possède pas d’étymologie” (Chantraine 1968: 72). Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (above, n. 10) 88 is likewise agnostic; he justly rejected Wilamowitz’s (above, n. 2) inner-Greek explanation of ἀμανρός as an “aöelische nebenform zu amalos”, viz. as a product of an Aeolic development of *amaros-* (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (such examples as *arei ‘curse’ > Lesbian úra - (Sapph. fr. 86.5) or *kora ‘maidens’ > Lesbian kora - (Sapph. fr. 53), Boeotian kora (IG 7.587, 6th cent.) prove beyond any doubt that digamma was eliminated in Aeolic after -r- without compensatory effects of any kind).

20 For instance, E. Zupitza compared ἀμανρός (taken to have been a color term) to Russian (s)múryj ‘sullen, dark-grey’ (‘Etymologien’, *Beiträge zur Kunde der indogermanischen Sprachen* 25 (1899) 89–105 (101); but this idea is rendered obsolete by the Armenian cognate of the Slavic word: mör, -i ‘dirt,
known for his propensity for substrate etymologies, labeled ἀμαυρός as Pre-Greek in his recent etymological dictionary. Beekes’ main reason for choosing this approach in this particular case was the alternation between ἀμαυρό- and μαυρό-, μαυρόε/-o-, such vacillation of the prothetic vowel allegedly being a hallmark of borrowings from the substrate language of the Balkans. However, there is another explanation for this alternation, which appears more plausible: μαυρόε/-o-, limited to poetic language, could be a product of a Leumann-style false resegmentation, whereby the initial vowel was reanalyzed as the final vowel of the preceding word. A possible starting point could be provided by a verse like Hes. Op. 693 ἄξονα κανάξας καὶ φορτία μαυρωθεὶ (this word division is guaranteed metrically: φορτί’ ἀμαυρωθεί would create a caesura after fourth trochee). Spreading from such verses the consonant-initial form μαυρόε/-o-, μαυρό- gained terrain in the poetic language.

A new solution is thus called for. As a starting point I should like to suggest that ἀμαυρός should be analyzed as a compound with a privative α:- the presence of a distinct feminine form ἀμαυρά (Aesch. +) does not stand in the way of analyzing ἀμαυρός as a compound, since the adjective must have been sufficiently obscure in order to be reanalyzed as a simplex and thus capable of forming a feminine.

What about the rest? I propose that the underlying Indo-European verbal root is *mā-(*meh₂- in modern notation) meaning to ‘grow’, ‘become big, old’: it is found in Latin mātūrus ‘full-grown, ripe’ and Slavic *mator- / *mater- ‘old’, to which I. Yakubovich has recently added the Hittite verb māi- ‘to grow, to thrive, to prosper’, mid. miyari ‘is born’, miyātar ‘growth’

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21 See Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary* (above, n. 10) 84.
22 Boisacq’s “Arcadien μαυρός” is apparently a mistake: I have not been able to locate the word in the corpus of Arcadian inscriptions and glosses.
The semantic idea of growth is also present in Old Irish *már ‘big’, Gothic *mais ‘more’. Now one way of forming verbal nouns in Proto-Indo-European was by using a suffix that had the form *-u̯r̤ in the nominative and accusative singular. By adding this suffix to our root we get a verbal noun *meh₂ur̤ the expected meanings of which would be ‘growth’, ‘magnitude’ and ‘ripeness’; it is possible that just this form is actually attested in Hittite mehūr ‘time’. But regardless of the Hittite it seems that we now have both morphologically and semantically plausible etymology for the Greek word: a privative compound *ṇ-meh₂ur-o- ‘having no growth, having no magnitude’ will give ἄμαυρός ‘weak’.

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26 See I. S. Yakubovich, ‘Indo-European *mā- ‘to grow’, in Indo-European Linguistics and Classical Philology 14/2, ed. N.N. Kazansky (St. Petersburg 2010) 478-492; Yakubovich also sought to connect several forms from Middle Iranian languages, collected in J. Cheung, Etymological Dictionary of the Iranian Verb (Leiden 2007) 257. I have several misgivings about some details of Yakubovich’s reconstruction of the root which will be addressed elsewhere.

27 These forms were first connected to Hittite māi- by E. Forrer apud S. Feist, Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache, 3rd edn (Leiden 1939) 341.

28 In oblique cases the form of the suffix was *-u̯(e)n- (so called heteroclitic stem alternation); in Greek it was extended by an additional *-t-, compare ὄδωρ, gen. ὄδατος < *ud-ṇ-t-os vs. Hittite μāṭar, gen. ṣitenaš ‘water’ or ḥẉur, gen. ḫẉurtoz < *(h,x)jēkʷ-ṇ-t-os vs. Old Indic yākṛt, gen. yaknāḥ, Latin iecur, iecineris ‘liver’). See A. L. Sihler, New Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin (New York 1995) 302-303.


30 Compare Greek ὄδωρ ‘water’ (*γωδρ / -n-, see above n. 28) vs. compound ἄνυδρός ‘having no water, waterless’ (*ṇ-udr-o-).